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## Viewing cable 97KUALALUMPUR4130, MAHATHIR FEUDING WITH ISLAMIC CONSERVATIVES

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g.

**#97KUALALUMPUR4130.**

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<a href="#">97KUALALUMPUR4130</a>	<a href="#">1997-10-23 01:55</a>	<a href="#">2011-08-30 01:44</a>	<a href="#">CONFIDENTIAL</a>	<a href="#">Embassy Kuala Lumpur</a>

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/2011/05/27/anwar-lacked-dr-ms-clout-in-tackling-islam/>

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USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI  
AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE  
AMEMBASSY MANILA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 004130

CINCPAC FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: (OCTOBER 20, 2007)

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SUBJECT: MAHATHIR FEUDING WITH ISLAMIC CONSERVATIVES

1. CLASSIFIED BY JOHN R. MALOTT, AMBASSADOR. REASON:  
1.5(D).

12. (C) SUMMARY. AS MALAYSIA'S CURRENCY HAS TUMBLED AND ITS SKIES HAVE FILLED WITH HAZE, PM MAHATHIR HAS STILL FOUND TIME FOR A NASTY DISPUTE WITH ISLAMIC CONSERVATIVES. RECENT ACTIONS BY ZEALOUS RELIGIOUS OFFICIALS LED THE PM TO ANNOUNCE A PLAN TO UNIFY SYARIAH LAW AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL (STRIPPING POWER FROM STATE RELIGIOUS OFFICIALS) AND TO CALL PUBLICLY FOR A MORE MODERATE, MODERN ISLAM. OUTRAGED MOSLEM CLERICS HAVE CIRCULATED ANONYMOUS LITERATURE ATTACKING THE PM AND THE RULING PARTY AND HAVE CRITICIZED THE GOVERNMENT IN FRIDAY SERMONS. THE PROMINENT MUFTI OF SELANGOR STATE EVEN CALLED MAHATHIR AN APOSTATE. THE GOVERNMENT HAS REACTED BY SACKING THE MUFTI, WARNING OTHER ISLAMIC LEADERS, AND CURTAILING OPEN DISTRIBUTION OF ISLAMIC OPPOSITION PARTY LITERATURE. THE WIDER MALAY COMMUNITY SHARES SOME OF THE CLERICS' CONCERNS, THOUGH FAR LESS ACUTELY; WOMEN ACTIVISTS SEEM TO BE THE SOLE MOSLEM CONSTITUENCY SQUARELY BACKING THE PM. DESPITE MAHATHIR'S BIZARRE OUTBURSTS AGAINST "THE WEST" DURING THE FINANCIAL CRISIS, IT IS WORTH REMEMBERING THE PM ADVOCATES A VERSION OF ISLAM THAT SERVES U.S. INTERESTS IN MALAYSIA AND IN THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC COMMUNITY. IT IS UNCLEAR WHETHER MAHATHIR'S HEIR APPARENT, DEPUTY PM ANWAR, WHO IS SO REASONABLE ON MANY ISSUES, HAS THE POLITICAL POSITION OR THE DESIRE TO TAKE ON MOSLEM CONSERVATISM AS VIGOROUSLY AS MAHATHIR HAS DONE. IN THE LONG RUN, THE GROWING PROPORTION OF MALAYS IN MALAYSIA'S ETHNIC MIX WILL PROBABLY LEAD INEXORABLY TO THE FURTHER ISLAMIZATION OF MALAYSIAN SOCIETY. END SUMMARY.

#### MAHATHIR ATTACKS CONSERVATIVE ISLAM

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13. (U) PM MAHATHIR, LIKE MANY OTHER WESTERN-EDUCATED MALAYS OF HIS GENERATION, IS AN OBSERVING MOSLEM WITH A MODERATE, LARGELY SECULAR WORLD VIEW. SEVERAL INCIDENTS INVOLVING ZEALOUS ISLAMIC AUTHORITIES HAVE ANGERED THE PM OVER THE LAST FEW MONTHS. IN JULY, A UNIT OF THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION PROPOSED MAKING THE STUDY OF "ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION" COMPULSORY FOR ALL STUDENTS, INCLUDING NON-MALAYS (IN MALAYSIA, MALAYS ARE NEARLY ALL MOSLEMS AND, EXCEPT FOR SOME INDIAN MOSLEMS, NON-MALAYS ARE NEARLY ALL NON-MOSLEMS). AFTER PROTESTS (AND THE PM'S INTERVENTION), THE REQUIRED COURSE WAS BROADENED TO "ASIAN CIVILIZATION." IN AUGUST, SELANGOR STATE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES LED THREE MALAY WOMEN AWAY IN HANDCUFFS FOR TAKING PART IN A BEAUTY PAGEANT, ATTRACTING THE ATTENTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS. ALSO IN AUGUST, SARAWAK ISLAMIC AUTHORITIES WARNED SEVERAL MALAY MEN NOT TO TAKE PART IN A BODYBUILDING COMPETITION THAT INCLUDED POSING IN BRIEF OUTFITS. THE BODYBUILDERS IGNORED THIS WARNING AND NEVER RECEIVED PUNISHMENT, HOWEVER.

14. (C) AFTER THE MESSY BEAUTY CONTEST INCIDENT, THE PM SAID THAT BY EARLY 1998 THE GOVERNMENT WOULD UNIFY SYARIAH LAW AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL THUS SHARPLY CURBING THE AUTONOMY OF LOCAL RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES. THE PM SAID VARYING STATE INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAMIC LAW "CONFUSED THE PEOPLE" AND ORDERED ALL ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES SUSPENDED PENDING THE REVIEW OF STATE LAWS. HE ALSO ORDERED STATE MUFTIS TO REVIEW ALL PROPOSED DECREES WITH AN ADVISORY PANEL THAT MUST INCLUDE WOMEN REPRESENTATIVES. THEORETICALLY, THE GOVERNMENT'S PLAN FOR STANDARDIZATION OF SYARIAH LAW WILL REQUIRE THE AGREEMENT OF THE STATES' RULING SULTANS, BUT SUCH CONSTITUTIONAL NICETIES HAVE RARELY DELAYED THE PM BEFORE. THE "UNIFICATION" OF SYARIAH LAW EARLY NEXT YEAR IS ALREADY A FAIT ACCOMPLI AND CONSERVATIVE CLERICS KNOW IT, BUT DON'T LIKE IT.

15. (C) IN EARLY SEPTEMBER, MAHATHIR UNEXPECTEDLY TOOK UP THE ISLAMIC ISSUE IN HIS KEYNOTE SPEECH AT THE UMNO (MALAYSIA'S RULING PARTY) GENERAL ASSEMBLY. IN HIS SPEECH, MAHATHIR CALLED ON MALAYS TO REJECT EXTREMISM AND NOTED THE RESULTS OF SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IN BOSNIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST. HE SAID MOSLEMS NEEDED TO MODERNIZE THEIR

BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN ACCORD WITH THE CHANGED CONDITIONS OF MODERN LIFE. HE ALSO CRITICIZED MOSLEMS WHO PUT MORE STOCK IN OUTWARD APPEARANCES (SUCH AS TRADITIONAL CLOTHES AND BEARDS FOR MEN AND HEADSCARVES FOR WOMEN) THAN IN LEADING A MORAL LIFE. SUCH A SPEECH MIGHT SOUND SENSIBLE ENOUGH TOWESTERN EARS, BUT BY ALL ACCOUNTS IT WAS A DISASTER WITH THE LARGELY MALAY AUDIENCE (MANY OF THE EN IN WHICH, INCLUDING DEPUTY PM ANWAR, SPORTING RADITIONAL DRESS AND GOATEES AND MOST OF THE WOMN, INCLUDING ANWAR'S WIFE, WEARING HEADSCARVES). PRESS COMMENT AND PUBLICDISCUSSION OF THE KEYNOTE SPEECH, IN PREVIOUS YEARS A PROMINENT ITEM OF PULIC DEBATE, WAS VIRTUALLY NIL. UMNO MEMBERS QUOTED IN THE PRESS WERE NON-COMMITTAL, WITH ONE SAYIG ONLY THAT THE TOPIC REQUIRED SERIOUS THOUGHT. AS ONE ANALYST SAID, NO ONE BUT MAHATHIR WOULD DRE TOUCH SUCH A SUBJECT.

#### CONSERVATIVES COUNTER-TTACK

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16. (C) UNLIKE UMNO MEMBERS, SOME CONSERVATIVES DID NOT HESITTE TO EXPRESS THEIR OUTRAGE OVER MAHATHIR'S ATTACK ON "EXTREMIST" ISLAM. MALAYSIA'S SOLE ISLAMIC PPOSITION PARTY, PAS, ISSUED A POINT FOR POINT REBUTTAL ON ITS WEB SITE AND IN THE PARTY NEWSPAPER. THE PAS PARTY NEWSPAPER ALSO DROPPED A BOMBSHELL BY REPORTING THAT THE PROMINENT MUFTI OF SELANGOR STATE HAD CALLED MAHATHIR AN APOSTATE. THOUGH THE MUFTI LATER DENIED THE REPORT, MANY (SECOND HAND) SOURCES CLAIM THE QUOTATION WAS ACCURATE. ONE SOURCE NOTED THAT THE SELANGOR MUFTI NOW GETS A WARM RECEPTION WHEN HE VISITS RELIGIOUS LEADERS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. REPORTEDLY, FRIDAY SERMONS AT MANY MOSQUES HAVE INCLUDED BOTH OBLIQUE AND DIRECT CRITICISM OF THE GOVERNMENT. THE POLICE CONFIRMED PUBLICLY THAT ANONYMOUS "POISON PEN" LITERATURE CRITICIZING THE PM IS CIRCULATING AT MOSQUES.

#### GOVERNMENT TIGHTENS SCREWS

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17. (U) THE GOVERNMENT HAS RESPONDED FIRMLY TO AGITATION BY RELIGIOUS CONSERVATIVES. AFTER THE APOSTATE REPORT, THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED IT WOULD ENFORCE A PREVIOUSLY IGNORED BAN ON STREET SALES OF THE PAS NEWSPAPER (UNDER MALAYSIAN LAW PARTY PUBLICATIONS MAY ONLY BE DISTRIBUTED TO PARTY MEMBERS). MAHATHIR SAID "SINCE WE FIND THE TABLOID IS LIBELOUS, WE WILL ENFORCE THE BAN IMMEDIATELY." ON OCTOBER 14, GOVERNMENT MINISTER IN THE PM'S DEPARTMENT ABDUL HAMID OTHMAN WARNED MOSLEM GROUPS NOT TO "UNDERMINE THE GOVERNMENT." HE SAID THE GOVERNMENT WAS AWARE OF SOME RELIGIOUS LEADERS' ATTEMPTS TO FOMENT TENSION IN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS AND WAS MONITORING MOSLEM GROUPS. ON OCTOBER 15, THE UMNO-CONTROLLED STATE GOVERNMENT OF SELANGOR ANNOUNCED THE TERM OF THE MUFTI OF SELANGOR WOULD NOT BE EXTENDED. THE CHIEF MINISTER OF SELANGOR SAID THE STATE NEEDED A MUFTI WHOSE VIEWS "WERE ACCEPTABLE TO ALL." GRUMBLING IN THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY LED ABDUL HAMID TO SAY ON OCTOBER 19 THAT THE "DECISION IS FINAL" AND WAS TAKEN BECAUSE OF THE MUFTI'S ADVANCED AGE. THE MINISTER'S STATEMENT WAS A BIT CURIOUS FOR TWO REASONS: 1) CURTAILING OF THE MUFTI'S TERM WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN A STATE, NOT A FEDERAL DECISION; AND 2) THE PM HIMSELF HAS REPEATEDLY STATED THAT HE WILL NOT STEP DOWN, THOUGH HE IS ONE YEAR OLDER THAN THE MUFTI.

#### VIEWS FROM THE STREET

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18. (C) MANY MALAYS, ESPECIALLY IN URBAN AREAS, SYMPATHIZE SOMEWHAT WITH THE PM'S VIEWS ON RELIGIOUS ZEALOTRY. THE BEAUTY PAGEANT CASE STRUCK MANY AS INDEED EXTREME (IT TURNED OUT THAT RELIGIOUS POLICE HAD BOUGHT TICKETS TO THE SHOW AND EATEN THE DINNER PROVIDED BEFORE SLAPPING HANDCUFFS ON THE MALAY WOMEN IN A WAY DESIGNED TO BE HUMILIATING). PROPONENTS OF CONSERVATIVE ISLAM ARE THUS A VOCAL MINORITY, THOUGH WITH SUBSTANTIAL RESERVOIRS OF SUPPORT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE, ON THE EAST COAST, AND AMONG

SOME POCKETS OF RELIGIOUS URBAN DWELLERS. NONETHELESS, MAHATHIR'S REMARKS AT THE UMNO GENERAL ASSEMBLY RAISED CONCERNS EVEN AMONG MORE SECULARLY MINDED MALAYS. ONE PROMINENT UMNO POLITICIAN ASKED US RHETORICALLY: "WHAT WILL THE PM SAY NEXT, THAT WE SHOULD EAT PORK?" THIS IS PERHAPS NOT A FAIR CHARACTERIZATION OF MAHATHIR'S VIEWS, BUT IT SHOWS THE ANXIETY THAT EVEN MODERATES FEEL ABOUT THE TONE AND DIRECTION OF HIS IDEAS ON "MODERNIZING" ISLAM.

#### WOMEN AND ISLAM

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¶9. (U) ISLAMIC WOMEN ACTIVISTS, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE FULLY BEHIND MAHATHIR. GROUPS LIKE "SISTERS OF ISLAM" HAVE LONG BEEN AGITATING FOR MANY OF THE SAME REFORMS MAHATHIR HAS PROPOSED. THE MODERNIZATION OF ISLAMIC ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN AND THE CREATION OF LEGAL AND SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS THAT BETTER PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF MOSLEM WOMEN ARE FULLY CONSONANT WITH MAHATHIR'S IDEAS.

#### COMMENT

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¶10. (C) THE PM HAS BEEN ON A VERBAL RAMPAGE LATELY, UTTERING BIZARRE REMARKS (LIKE HIS ANTI-SEMITIC COMMENTS LAST WEEK) THAT ALMOST SEEM PURPOSELY SELF-DESTRUCTIVE. WHILE WE FOCUS ON MAHATHIR'S ANTI-WESTERN REMARKS, IT IS WORTH REMEMBERING THAT MAHATHIR LASHES OUT AGAINST ANYTHING HE DOESN'T LIKE, FROM LITTERBUGS TO "RADICAL ISLAM." HE CONSISTENTLY ADVOCATES A MODERATE ISLAM SQUARELY IN LINE WITH U.S. INTERESTS AND VALUES. THE PM, FOR BETTER OR WORSE, IS NOT AFRAID TO TAKE ON ANYONE, INCLUDING CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIC GROUPS THAT GENERALLY HAVE NEGATIVE VIEWS TOWARD THE U.S. MAHATHIR IS ALSO IMPORTANT AS A VOICE OF MODERATION WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC COMMUNITY. THOUGH THE PM'S HEIR APPARENT, DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER ANWAR, IS THE PM'S "GOOD CONSCIENCE," ANWAR HAS NOT PROVEN HE HAS EITHER THE POLITICAL STANDING OR THE DESIRE TO TAKE ON CONSERVATIVE ISLAM. ANWAR STARTED HIS CAREER AS A MOSLEM ACTIVIST AND SEEMS LOATH TO CONFRONT HIS FORMER ASSOCIATES. FOR EXAMPLE, ANWAR'S REACTION TO THE BEAUTY PAGEANT INCIDENT, WHICH HAPPENED WHILE THE PM WAS OUT OF THE COUNTRY AND ANWAR WAS IN CHARGE, WAS MUCH LESS VIGOROUS. MOREOVER, ANWAR, IF HE DOES BECOME THE NEXT PM, WILL NOT HAVE MAHATHIR'S ALMOST UNQUESTIONED AUTHORITY. THUS, FOR POLITICAL REASONS HE MAY BE RELUCTANT TO TAKE STRONG STANDS THAT UPSET THE VOCAL RELIGIOUS CONSTITUENCY.

#### IN THE LONG RUN ...

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¶11. (C) IN THE LONG RUN DEMOGRAPHICS WILL PROBABLY DICTATE AN INCREASED ROLE FOR ISLAM IN MALAYSIA. MALAYS NOW CONSTITUTE 55 PERCENT OF MALAYSIA'S POPULATION. GOVERNMENT PRO-NATALIST POLICIES FOR MALAYS ARE PREDICTED TO LEAD TO A 70 PERCENT MALAY MAJORITY BY 2020. SOME ANALYSTS SAY THAT URBANIZATION AND ECONOMIC MODERNIZATION WILL LEAD TO AN INCREASINGLY SECULAR MALAY COMMUNITY. RECENT EVENTS SHOW THE OPPOSITE ALSO COULD HAPPEN, HOWEVER. AS THE OUTSIDE WORLD IMPINGES ON TRADITIONAL MALAY CULTURE, MANY MALAYS SEEM TO BE REACTING BY TURNING BACK TO THEIR ISLAMIC ROOTS -- AT LEAST IN EXTERNAL FORMS OF OBSERVANCE. FOR INSTANCE, OVER THE PAST DECADE NOTICEABLY MORE MALAY WOMEN NOW WEAR HEADSCARVES. THIS ISLAMIC RESURGENCE, EVEN IN ITS MILD MALAYSIAN FORM, WORRIES MALAYSIA'S NON-MALAY COMMUNITIES. GIVEN POLITICAL UNCERTAINTIES, IT IS NOT CLEAR WHETHER MAHATHIR'S SUCCESSOR (WHETHER ANWAR OR SOMEONE ELSE) WILL HAVE SUFFICIENT AUTHORITY TO MAKE SURE DIFFERENCES DO NOT GET OUT OF HAND. WE EXPECT, THEREFORE, ISLAMIC ISSUES BECOME TO BECOME MORE PROMINENT IN COMING YEARS.

MALOTT